CHAPTER THREE

Emotional Self-Care

The world that Autistic people inhabit does not align with our neurological and communication styles. This, plus our heightened nervous system, makes us particularly vulnerable to emotional struggles. For this reason, it is especially important that you prioritize your emotional self-care. Emotional self-care is anything you do that helps develop emotional awareness and strengthen your resilience. In this chapter, you'll explore activities in several categories that will help you cultivate emotional self-care:

- **Managing Autistic burnout:** By reducing emotional demands, recognizing early signs of burnout, and clearing your mind, you can regain a sense of control and address your emotions with greater empowerment.
- **Setting boundaries and self-advocacy:** You can help protect your emotional well-being by setting boundaries, unmasking, and advocating for yourself.
- **Cultivating emotional awareness, literacy, and resilience:** Simply having the words to describe your feelings is a powerful skill that can help you identify and process your emotions.
- **Regulating emotions:** Think of emotion regulation skills as your toolbox for managing those intense feelings so you can work through them effectively. Techniques like labeling your emotions and grounding yourself can help fine-tune your emotion regulation skills.

By leaning into Autistic strengths, such as an exceptional eye for detail and pattern recognition, you can approach your emotions with curiosity and care.

Prioritize Rest to Avoid Burnout

Autistic Burnout

Did you know that burnout is one of the causes of depression and suicidality for Autistic people? Do you know what one of the causes of burnout is? Not getting sufficient rest!

Autistic people need a lot of rest. Indeed, the sheer amount needed can be frustrating. Yet the alternative—a debilitating burnout—is even less appealing. So one of the best things you can do for your emotional health is to prioritize rest.

Prioritizing rest can be difficult for many people, especially those driven by an internal belief that you should be able to just "push through"—a notion often tied to internalized ableism. A propensity to people-please as a coping mechanism for social differences might also hamper your ability to rest. In these cases, overcoming your internalized ableism is crucial in unlocking your capacity for rest.

Additionally, your notion of rest may differ from allistic norms. For instance, conventional self-care rituals like spa days, often relished by allistic individuals, may sound terrible to you. These types of activities are quite stressful to me—I instead find solace and restoration in engaging with my interests, learning, and creative pursuits.

Your version of rest might entail reading a favorite book, listening to your favorite podcast, or hiking in nature—a form of "restorative rest." Avoid falling into the trap of "cheap rest"—those quick fixes like binge-watching TV shows—which may provide fleeting gratification yet leave you feeling more drained.

The crucial aspect is not how your rest aligns with societal norms but whether it rejuvenates and restores you. Embrace your distinct forms of rest and allow them to revitalize you.

Engage In Sensory Detox

Autistic Burnout

When I worked in hospitals and universities, I would invariably return home each night shrouded in palpable fatigue and plagued by a persistent, low-grade fever. It was a puzzling malaise that seemed to persist without a discernible cause. My revelation came when I realized I was experiencing sensory overload to such a degree that my body was interpreting it as a physical illness. My Autistic child and I now refer to these as "sensory sick" moments, when we feel the wear and tear of a high-sensory day.

Once the onset of "sensory sickness" begins to creep in, I know it's time to initiate my sensory-detox routine—a series of calming and restorative activities designed to rebalance my sensory system. This might involve taking a hot shower to cleanse and refresh, changing into my most comfortable clothes, or sinking into a bean bag chair cloaked in a weighted blanket while indulging in the rhythm of my favorite stim song. I might also turn to my trusty TENS unit for relief. (TENS units, short for Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation units, are these handy devices that provide mini electrical zaps or pulses. While they are predominantly used for pain, they also work to provide repetitive sensory input.) When I engage in these rituals, I can feel the harsh sensory residue of the day gradually dissolve.

Your sensory detox will be as unique as your sensory profile. While I find solace in stillness and weighted comfort, you might prefer an energetic walk or music. Explore and identify what suits you, then curate your sensory-detox ritual—a haven for those intense high-sensory days when "sensory sickness" looms.

Identify Signs of Autistic Burnout

Autistic Burnout

Many Autistic people face Autistic burnout, which is often brought about by striving to meet allistic expectations, demands, and pace of life without suitable support structures. Autistic burnout manifests as profound fatigue, heightened sensory sensitivities, and a loss of skills, particularly executive functioning and speech abilities. Although distinct from depression, it often culminates in depression if left unchecked.

Identifying the signs of Autistic burnout is essential for gauging your boundaries, implementing self-care measures, and reaching out for support when necessary.

Let's explore some key signs you should be watchful for:

- **Unrelenting fatigue:** Persistent exhaustion, even after adequate rest and sleep, is a key part of Autistic burnout. When grappling with burnout, your body may feel utterly exhausted, leaving you scrambling for energy to complete even the simplest tasks.
- **Heightened sensory sensitivities:** Sensitivity to sensory stimuli—be it noise, light, texture, or smell—intensifies during burnout, amplifying your susceptibility to sensory overload, meltdowns, and shutdowns. Sensory stimuli that used to feel manageable may now feel overwhelming.
- **Skills and functioning decline:** A conspicuous drop in skills like focusing, organizing, problem-solving, and speaking is another feature of burnout and makes social interactions more daunting.
- **Emotional dysregulation:** Burnout-induced dysregulation in your nervous and sensory systems hampers your ability to manage your emotions, resulting in intense emotions or emotional numbness. Increased anxiety, irritability, or feelings of being overwhelmed are common during burnout.

- **Diminished tolerance for change:** During burnout, your capacity to absorb and adapt to change wanes, and you may seek comfort in sameness and predictability. You might experience heightened distress in the face of the unexpected.
- **Social isolation:** Burnout can spark a retreat into solitude and diminish your ability to engage socially. You might withdraw from social interactions and lose motivation for once-enjoyed hobbies or activities.
- **Masking:** Burnout can throw a wrench in your masking abilities, and it can be confusing if you don't understand what is happening! Interestingly, lots of adults don't get their autism diagnosis until they are in burnout and have lost their ability to mask.

Being in tune with these early signs of Autistic burnout is vital for your proactive engagement in emotional self-care. Once you start noticing these signals, you understand it's time to use your SOS self-care tools and/or ask for the support you need. Try to alleviate some of your burdens where possible by dropping demands, establishing healthy boundaries, and engaging in sensory detox (use other entries in this book for ideas).

This proactive approach doesn't just help manage burnout—it helps prevent a potential downward spiral into depression. Aim to view these signs not as threats but as gentle reminders from your body and mind to pause and take care of yourself.

Drop Unnecessary Demands

Autistic Burnout

As explored in the Identify Signs of Autistic Burnout entry earlier in this chapter, Autistic people are prone to burnout. Complicating matters, we tend to blur the lines between essential and nonessential demands, a manifestation of our all-or-nothing thinking pattern and inclination toward perfectionism. Many of us tend to pile on extra pressure and demands, and that often leads to burnout, cognitive overload, feelings of being overwhelmed, stress, and anxiety! It can turn into this never-ending cycle that takes us on an emotional roller coaster.

It's especially important to consider what demands to drop when you're in burnout. However, your mind likely gets cloudy during burnout, making this distinction even more challenging. Therefore, it's beneficial to prepare ahead of time by earmarking which demands can be let go. Having a ready-to-go list of "droppable" demands can be a lifesaver on high-sensory days or when burnout signs start to surface.

Consider employing a traffic light system for your responsibilities, categorizing demands into green, yellow, and red activities. Green tasks can be put aside without notable ramifications. Yellow tasks can occasionally be set aside, depending on prevailing circumstances. Red tasks pose more of a challenge to dismiss, given the potentially significant repercussions.

In our home, for instance, family dinner is a "green light" demand—one that can be sidelined on a high-sensory day. Even routine activities like showering can be deferred (though perhaps not for a five-day stretch!).

By proactively pinpointing droppable demands, you can more effectively navigate burnout periods. You'll have already made decisions on what to let go, thus allowing you to eliminate further decision fatigue and prioritize rest.

Find Solace in Familiar Stories

Autistic Burnout

For Autistic people, there's a unique comfort found in the familiar rhythms of repetition and predictability. That's why revisiting your cherished movies or rereading your favorite books can offer you profound comfort and solace when you encounter feelings of being overwhelmed, stress, or anxiety.

After journeying through the unpredictable terrain of an allistic world, the known world of your much-loved narratives provides a comforting haven. Knowing the course of the story, with its highs and lows, imparts a calming certainty to your mind.

And let's be honest—there's just something magical about revisiting a beloved story that you know inside and out. Each encounter uncovers previously overlooked nuances, or it rekindles your initial affection for the tale. It's akin to spending time with a longtime, trusted companion.

Burnout or overstimulation, however, can cloud your decision-making abilities and even obscure your memory so you have a hard time remembering your favorites. To counteract this, make a list of your top choices ahead of time so you can refer to them easily whenever you need them.

You can create a playlist of beloved songs, jot down on your phone a list of your go-to TV shows, or assign a specific place in your home for your favorite books so they're easy to spot when you need them. Dedicate some time to compile a reservoir of your cherished pieces, making them readily accessible. This simple idea may not seem momentous, but when you need support ASAP, having your lists already made or your items in an easy-to-find spot will help you soothe yourself that much faster.

Clear Emotional Clutter with a Brain Dump

Autistic Burnout

Neurodivergent minds house an intricate web of connections, associations, and ceaseless activity. This continuous buzz can complicate decision-making and task completion, impede restful sleep, and cause stress and anxiety.

To help process those difficult feelings, consider doing a "brain dump." Think of a brain dump as a mental cleanse where you transcribe the whirlwind of thoughts and emotions in your head onto paper. This act of transcription releases the brain from its perceived obligation to remember, allowing your mind to feel free and clear.

One of the chief benefits of a brain dump lies in its potential to alleviate any stress and anxiety you may feel. The swirling chaos of ideas and thoughts can impede focus, but by transferring this chaos onto paper, you unburden your mind, clear your mental pathways, and reduce stress. Additionally, a brain dump allows you to reclaim valuable mental real estate. This newfound clarity and spaciousness can stimulate creativity, enhance focus, and promote a more profound sense of peace and satisfaction. In essence, a brain dump not only clears your mind but also curates an internal environment primed for other types of self-care, like rest, innovation, and self-reflection.

There are many ways to try a brain dump. You can try them all and see which one works best for you, or just jump to the one that resonates most strongly with you.

Here are several ways to try brain dumping:

- **Task dump:** Write down your to-do list to tidy your mind and prioritize tasks.
- **Free-association dump:** Write down *all* the thoughts in your mind, even if they are not connected to one another.
- **Idea dump:** Note all your creative sparks, big and small.
- **Organization dump:** Draft a mind map or concept map to systematically arrange your thoughts for a task or project. (See the Map Out Your Thoughts entry in this chapter for instructions.)
- **Stress dump:** List all the things stressing you out. This will help declutter your mind and clear mental fog.
- **Gratitude dump:** Write down everything you're grateful for. This process shifts your focus from negative thoughts to more positive aspects of life.
- **Emotional dump:** Without judgment or analysis, note all the emotions you're experiencing. This exercise can help you gain clarity about your emotional state and identify and release suppressed feelings.
- **Nighttime dump:** If a bustling mind is making it hard for you to sleep, consider writing down whatever is in your brain before bedtime.

In addition to stress and anxiety relief, brain dumps can be beneficial for people grappling with executive functioning challenges, particularly for "AuDHDers" (Autistic people with ADHD). Brain dumps can help AuDHDers with organizing and visualizing thoughts, prioritizing tasks, and deconstructing projects into manageable steps.

Undertaking a brain dump using whatever method works for you can be a powerful self-care strategy to manage stress, cleanse your mind, and restore your equilibrium.

Part Ways with Masking

Boundaries and Self-Advocacy

Have you ever noticed yourself instinctively adopting someone else's accent, body language, or behavior during a conversation? This phenomenon, often experienced among Autistic people who mask, transforms us into conversational chameleons.

Many Autistic people, driven by an innate drive for safety, adapt to social differences by masking. We become adept at sensing others' needs and adjusting ourselves to meet them. This ability can become so deeply ingrained that it permeates your language and mannerisms. While it's a clever survival strategy, it has significant drawbacks. Autistic masking is often linked with heightened anxiety and depression levels. Furthermore, when you consistently mold your identity based on others' needs, it becomes challenging to establish your sense of self.

Again, masking is rooted in an innate need for safety. Many BIPOC Autistic people are navigating the double layer of masking and code-switching. To safely unmask, you must first feel safe, therefore the conversation of unmasking must always be held within the same conversation as safety, especially for the most marginalized within the Autistic community.

Even when you're in a safe environment, unlearning masking behaviors can be a challenging process that involves several things, such as:

- **Acknowledging** and confronting Autistic shame
- **Establishing** healthy boundaries
- **Prioritizing** your own needs and desires

But before you can effectively communicate and set boundaries, you need to start at a more fundamental level—by discovering your preferences! The first step toward shedding the chameleon skin is to invest time in discovering your own desires, wants, and needs.

Here's a good way to start: Conduct self-check-ins once or twice a day, solely to connect with your current wants and needs. Ask yourself, "What do I need right now?" or "What do I want right now?" For instance, during a conversation, instead of wondering whether the other person is enjoying the conversation or if you're causing any embarrassment, flip the narrative and instead ask yourself, "Am I enjoying this conversation? Do *I* want to continue this conversation?"

The first step toward breaking free from masking is learning to tune into yourself. If you've spent a lifetime tapping into the needs of others, you likely struggle to tune into your own inner world.

Once you have clarity on your needs and wants, you can begin to set boundaries and communicate assertively (see the Discover the Power of Self-Advocacy in this chapter for more on this topic).

Be mindful to extend kindness and compassion toward yourself throughout this journey of unmasking. It's natural to feel uncertain or uncomfortable as you explore your true self and unlearn habitual masking behaviors. Recognize that this process is not about forcing change but rather about gently allowing authenticity to surface at its own pace. Celebrate the small victories, and don't get disheartened by the setbacks. Remember that you're not alone; many Autistic people are walking this path alongside you. Sharing your experiences with supportive communities can provide a sense of camaraderie and shared understanding. Most importantly, remember that every step you take toward authenticity is a testament to your strength and resilience.

Discover the Power of Self-Advocacy

Boundaries and Self-Advocacy

The concept of self-advocacy may initially seem daunting to you—but it can be as straightforward as requesting a different seat or seeking clarification on a puzzling question. In essence, self-advocacy involves voicing your needs. As an Autistic individual, it often falls on you to request the accommodations that enable you to function optimally in a world typically tailored to the needs of allistic bodies and minds.

The process of self-advocacy can be streamlined by keeping the following equation in mind:

Self-Disclosure + Request = Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy frequently involves intertwining a disclosure about a particular need with a specific request. While the disclosure part isn't always necessary, it's this pairing that morphs it into a powerful act of self-advocacy.

For instance, I recently found myself seated at a restaurant at a metallic table under glaring artificial light. The metallic odor proved overwhelming. I asked the server if I could relocate, explaining, "I have sensory sensitivities, and the metallic aroma is making me nauseated. Could I possibly switch to a wooden table?" The server graciously complied, and I found myself in a comfortable spot with natural lighting and a wooden table.

Let's look at a few more examples of the self-advocacy equation in action:

- "I have auditory-processing differences, which makes it hard for me to hear in loud environments. Can we continue our conversation outside?"
- "I thrive on direct communication. Would you mind elaborating on your feedback so I can better understand how to improve?"

It's crucial to remember that full disclosure is not a prerequisite for self-advocacy. Partial self-disclosure, such as mentioning "sensory differences," "auditory-processing difficulty," or "a preference for direct communication," is completely acceptable. Or you can simply request what you need without any explanation at all. Articulating your specific needs and making a request is particularly assertive and effective self-advocacy.

Sometimes jotting down a quick script ahead of time can make the interaction go more smoothly. To practice, reflect on the past week, identifying situations where accommodations would have been beneficial. Using the self-advocacy equation, create scripts for those scenarios. Or consider common experiences you have and write self-advocacy scripts for those. Practice reciting these scripts aloud. Keep your comfort level with self-disclosure in mind and modify the scripts as needed.

Self-advocacy is a powerful skill, and like any skill, it can be honed with practice. Don't berate yourself if you stumble in your initial attempts. In addition, there will unfortunately be instances where you might face resistance or misunderstanding. Such reactions often stem from a lack of knowledge about neurodivergence and are not a reflection of your worth or your request's validity. When faced with such responses, reaffirm your worth and remind yourself that you deserve accommodations that allow you to interact with the world. It might be helpful to have a supportive friend or a mentor with whom you can debrief and strategize for future instances. With time, you'll notice that self-advocacy becomes more natural and the hurdles less daunting.

Dismantle Stereotypes about Autism

Boundaries and Self-Advocacy

Promoting your rights and asserting your needs can often be challenging due to the widespread misinformation and stereotypes associated with autism. Disclosing your autism can sometimes invite skepticism, invalidation, and questioning—plus, it also often involves providing others with a comprehensive education on autism, which adds to your emotional load.

Let's tackle some common stereotypes and misconceptions. You can use these insights in your daily conversations to dispel myths and advocate for yourself:

- **Empathy:** While some Autistic people have lower levels of empathy, studies have found that this is often related to a condition called alexithymia (a condition causing difficulty in recognizing and naming emotions). Being Autistic doesn't mean we lack empathy. Quite the contrary, many of us experience heightened empathy and possess a deep capacity for understanding and sharing emotions.
- **Rudeness:** Characterized by honesty, authenticity, and directness, Autistic communication may be perceived as rude by some allistic people. However, this perception is a cultural interpretation. Indeed, it could be argued that direct feedback is more respectful than passive-aggressive options.
- **Eye contact:** There is an assumption that Autistic people "can't" make eye contact. Many Autistic people do find sustained eye contact uncomfortable. Neuroimaging studies have shown heightened amygdala activation during such interactions, indicating that our fear center becomes more activated, making sustained eye contact a more stressful and emotionally charged experience but is not a physical impossibility.

- **Conversational skills:** Engaging in reciprocal conversation, especially small talk, can be challenging for many Autistic people. However, this discomfort tends to lessen when discussing areas of interest or when interacting with other Autistic people. Thus, context and topic are significant contributors to our conversational capabilities.
- **Relationships and sexuality:** Autistic people encompass a diverse spectrum of sexual and romantic inclinations. Many of us form long-term partnerships, have children, and build families, underscoring the diversity and richness of our experiences.
- **Aggression:** Harming others is not a common trait associated with autism—in fact, the majority of us are much more likely to harm ourselves than harm others. Instances of aggression, such as mass shootings, typically involve coexisting conditions or external influences. Meltdowns, which may result in aggression, often occur when communication attempts through other means have been dismissed. It is crucial to recognize the root causes and triggers of such behaviors.
- **Emotional experience:** Alexithymia, if present, can make identifying and expressing emotions challenging for some Autistic people. However, many of us harbor intricate and profoundly emotional inner lives. Our unique ways of expressing and experiencing emotions may differ from neuronormative standards, but our emotional experiences are deep and impactful.
- **Intelligence:** Autistic people span the full intellectual spectrum, similar to allistic individuals. The stereotype of unintelligence is often fueled by the prevalence of coexisting intellectual disabilities among diagnosed Autistic people. On the other hand, media portrayals of Autistic people as geniuses or savants have perpetuated the misconception that we're all extraordinarily intelligent. In truth, we exhibit a broad range of intellectual capabilities.

By dismantling autism stereotypes, you can help lay the groundwork for a world that acknowledges the diverse experiences of Autistic people.

Manage Hyper-Empathy

Boundaries and Self-Advocacy

Similar to how an Autistic person may be hyper- or hyposensitive to sensory experiences, an Autistic person can also be hypo-empathetic (have difficulty accessing emotions of empathy) or hyper-empathetic (have heightened sensitivity to the pain of others).

Hyper-empathetic people are deeply impacted by the energy and emotions of those around them. Additionally, they are hypersensitive to the suffering in the world. They absorb and are profoundly affected by the emotional atmosphere. This is also my experience, and I've often used the metaphor that it is like I have porous skin—it's full of holes that allow everything to enter. My skin often fails to shield me from the world. It fails to keep out the constant influx. Those of us who live with "porous skin" are chronically bombarded with the emotions and energy of the people around us.

To compensate, I craft "artificial skin." My routines, special interests, repetitions, rituals, boundaries, and deliberate decisions create a carefully constructed barrier. This artificial skin provides an added layer of protection. If you, too, absorb the emotions around you, consider the following ways to create your artificial skin and shield your porous self:

- **Implement routines and rituals:** Establish consistent routines and engage in rituals that bring you comfort and stability. These can provide a sense of grounding and help you regulate the overwhelming emotional input.
- **Engage your interests:** Delve into your interests as a form of refuge. Immersing yourself in activities or topics that captivate your attention can create a shield against the emotional intensity of others and help your mind unhook from the suffering of the world.

- **Choose your company wisely:** Spend time with people whose energy positively influences you, as their emotions can significantly impact you.
- **Establish healthy boundaries:** Set and maintain boundaries to safeguard your emotional well-being. Prioritize your needs and limit emotional demands.
- **Manage your news consumption:** Be mindful of the news you expose yourself to and consider adding filters to protect your nervous system. Painful news stories can easily hijack your nervous system, and the combination of hyper-empathy and hyperfixation can make news cycles particularly painful for Autistic people. Be thoughtful and deliberate in managing your news and social media consumption.
- **Have rituals of releasing:** Whether it's drawing upon mindfulness practices or spiritual practices, find ways to release the weight of the world's pain. For example, at the end of the day, visualize releasing the pain you have taken in throughout the day to a higher power, spirit, the collective unconscious, or just into the air.
- **Embrace agency:** The mix of hyper-empathy and disempowerment can be challenging. Redirect your energy to areas where you can effect positive change. Whether your passion is antiracist efforts, supporting LGBTQIA+ rights, or environmental action, channel your empathy into meaningful action.

By consciously crafting this "artificial skin," you can protect yourself from the negative effects of energy absorption. Instead, use your natural empathy to create good in the world!

Curtail the Apology Reflex

Boundaries and Self-Advocacy

Do you habitually apologize, even when others bump into you or when you're simply asking for clarification? Does this apology reflex manifest everywhere in your life? Many Autistic people tend to apologize excessively. It's as if we feel compelled to apologize for our mere existence.

Before realizing I was Autistic and consciously addressing this issue, I found myself apologizing relentlessly. I felt a constant need to justify my existence by being excessively accommodating. Whenever my presence seemed to cause any inconvenience, regardless of fault, an apology would follow. Due to our efforts to fit into a neurotypical society and the shame we experience when we're unable to do so, many of us have become accustomed to apologizing for simply taking up space.

While expressing regret when you genuinely hurt someone or err is important, continually apologizing for merely existing needs reassessment. This reflex reinforces a negative self-narrative of being a burden or an inconvenience, leading to feelings of neurodivergent shame and low self-esteem and adversely affecting our emotional health.

To break free from the apology reflex, try a new response. Next time someone inadvertently bumps into you (or the reverse), use phrases like "Excuse me" or "Pardon me" rather than automatically saying, "I'm sorry." Adjusting your language helps you shift away from constant self-deprecation and fosters a more affirming sense of self. Over time, you can learn to stop apologizing for everything and begin to cultivate a more positive and confident self-image!

Break Free from Toxic Attachments

Boundaries and Self-Advocacy

Given that many Autistic people are inherently trusting, coupled with a tendency to people-please, we can be particularly vulnerable to social manipulation. This, paired with difficulty deciphering hidden intentions and manipulative behaviors, further heightens the risk of encountering a toxic relationship.

Toxic relationships are characterized by inconsistent affection and a roller coaster of emotional highs and lows, and they are harmful to a person's psyche. This confusing cycle, even if painful at times, can feel addictive and tough to escape. Recognizing these patterns and their toll on your emotional health is key. When evaluating a relationship, focus on how it makes you feel.

Reflect on the following:

- Are there recurring instances of criticism, manipulation, or control?
- Does it leave you feeling unsafe, anxious, or doubting your self-worth?
- Do I feel comfortable and safe with this person?
- Do they openly criticize or ridicule me?
- Do I feel manipulated by them?
- Do they use affection as a control tactic?
- Do they try to control me?

Choosing to distance yourself from a toxic relationship is hard, but you *can* do it. First, be sure you are physically safe. Then, begin to limit your interactions with the individual. Consider garnering support from trustworthy friends and family or a professional counselor. Cultivating a supportive network can boost confidence and promote emotional balance during this transition.

Drawing lines and breaking free from toxic ties are not only bold acts of self-protection—they're powerful assertions of your intrinsic value.

Map Out Your Thoughts

Emotional Awareness, Literacy, and Resilience

Mapping out your thoughts can be a powerful way to increase emotional self-awareness and organize your thinking. Thought mapping goes beyond a simple brain dump (as discussed in the Clear Emotional Clutter with a Brain Dump entry in this chapter). This technique is about making visible the connections, ties, and patterns among your thoughts.

The Autistic brain naturally thinks in associations and patterns, which is why answering questions can sometimes feel like a marathon! Our brains want to provide *all* the context and describe *all* the associations. We often perceive the interconnections and patterns, creating a sophisticated and intricate web inside our minds, much like a Wikipedia page, as poignantly described by Autistic comedian Hannah Gadsby.

Traditional problem-solving methods like pros-and-cons lists or compartmentalized strategies may not suit your brain's associative style. Thought mapping, a method that allows you to visualize connections between ideas, can be a great alternative. Thought mapping allows you to illustrate the relationships between ideas, feelings, and issues, a boon for emotional awareness.

Whether you're brainstorming for a project, solving a problem, or chalking out a life plan, here's how you get started:

1. Start by **jotting down** your central theme or problem in the center of a page. Circle it for emphasis.
2. Next, **identify** subthemes or factors that contribute to the main theme or problem. If your central issue is stress, for example, potential subcategories could include stress from school, relationships, or work.
3. **Connect** each subcategory to the central circle with lines, creating a web of related topics.

4. Go deeper by adding more bubbles to each subcategory. For example, under "school stress," you might **pinpoint** issues like a difficult research paper.
5. Continue **expanding** your map, branching out and forming associations as you go.
6. **Reflect** on your completed thought map. Take the time to observe the interconnected issues and patterns that have emerged. This is a chance to gain insights, discover new perspectives, and find potential solutions. Note any revelations or ideas that spring up during this reflective process. This step is key to enhancing emotional awareness and understanding your thought patterns.

Thought maps aren't only for problem-solving; they're also great for highlighting positives, like your values, identities, and things you're thankful for. The beauty of a thought map is its flexibility—you can put anything in the center!

Choosing a thought map over a linear list can be a game changer for associative thinkers and visually inclined minds. Translating your thoughts onto paper not only helps increase emotional awareness; it also eases stress by externalizing thoughts from your mind.

Grasp Difficult Emotions

Emotional Awareness, Literacy, and Resilience

When I was in my first year of training to become a psychologist, one of the skills we learned was identifying and labeling other people's emotions. I observed classmates smoothly mastering these emotional-reflection exercises while I stared down at a long list of emotion words struggling to know what to do with them! I couldn't help but wonder why these exercises felt so difficult for me.

It wasn't until I discovered that I was Autistic that my complex relationship with emotions started to make sense. I've always understood my internal landscape through concepts, ideas, analysis, and images. In contrast, the realm of emotions felt like an alien landscape. About half of Autistic folks grapple with alexithymia, a condition causing difficulty in recognizing and naming emotions.

If you can't pin down what you're feeling, boosting your emotional awareness and resilience becomes a tall order. This emotional opacity can hamper your ability to regulate emotions, understand your needs and wants, connect emotionally with others, and even connect to yourself. That's why fostering emotional awareness and literacy is essential.

Here are some practices to help you amplify emotional awareness and literacy when emotions feel elusive:

- **Visualize:** Autistic brains often lean heavily on visual processing. Look online for tools, like an emotion matrix, feeling wheel, or feeling list, which can help convert abstract emotions into concrete visual concepts. You can download several of these for free at NeurodivergentInsights.com.
- **Read:** Fiction can offer valuable insights into emotions. Authors give us windows into characters' emotional landscapes, decoding emotions, intentions, and motivations—thus enhancing emotional understanding.

- **Engage with music or photo prompts:** Stimuli, like music and photos, can spark strong emotional responses. Use these prompts to practice diving deeper into your emotions and enhancing your emotional awareness.
- **Journal for emotional awareness:** Journaling provides an avenue for accessing your inner world in ways that spoken language often cannot. By journaling to identify and explore your emotions, you can increase your awareness of them. Additionally, you can find patterns and identify common themes, triggers, and more.

The world of emotions may seem confusing and disorienting, but with practice, intentionality, and persistence, you will find it easier to navigate. However, cultivating emotional awareness is not an overnight task—it's a journey. Some days it might feel like you're making huge strides, while others it might seem like you're back at square one. That's okay. Patience and persistence are your allies in this process. Over time, you'll notice patterns, gain insights, and understand yourself on a deeper level. Celebrate each small victory along the way—every moment of awareness is a step forward on this journey of emotional literacy. Developing emotional awareness and literacy not only unlocks profound self-discovery but also ushers in a richer understanding of the world.

Practice Gratitude

Emotional Awareness, Literacy, and Resilience

I've always been sensitive to experiences where it feels as if someone is trying to manipulate an emotional response out of me, such as with motivational speakers. This is why I used to be a bit skeptical of things like gratitude practices, as they seemed like a form of self-manipulation. However, my perspective changed when I learned the neuroscience behind them and realized that my skepticism wasn't justified. Gratitude practices are not about manipulating yourself to feel something that isn't real. Instead, they prime your brain to be on the lookout for the things in your life that really do bring you joy, connection, meaning, and gratitude. They help balance out your brain and correct for confirmation bias.

Your brain is naturally wired to seek out certain aspects of your environment. So, for example, if you're depressed, your mind tends to focus on negative thoughts about yourself, the world, and the future. Your brain is essentially filtering out anything that would go against your depression and laser focusing on the negative.

Many Autistic people are predisposed to view life through a more anxious or depressed lens, and cultivating gratitude can counteract that confirmation bias. By incorporating gratitude into your life, you provide a counterbalance, allowing you to shift your focus and actively seek out moments of goodness amid the challenges of life. Rather than blocking out the reality of your experience, gratitude practices offer a broader perspective and help you appreciate the positive aspects that may be easily overlooked.

Starting a gratitude practice doesn't have to be a taxing endeavor.

Here are three simple ways to incorporate gratitude into your life:

1. **Think of three good things:** At the end of each day, list three good things that happened. They could be as simple as a beautiful sunset you saw, a pleasant interaction, something delicious you ate, or something you did that you're proud of.
2. **Conduct a daily review:** Replay the three good things from the day after you identify them. Over time, your brain will start actively seeking out similar moments throughout the day.
3. **Post gratitude reminders:** Place visual reminders, such as sticky notes, in your environment to prompt you to pause and reflect on something you're grateful for.

These practices gradually rewire your brain, expanding your capacity to notice and appreciate the positive aspects of life. Starting a gratitude practice is an intentional effort to recalibrate your thinking patterns and cultivate a more balanced outlook so you can more fully appreciate life's positive aspects.

Repeat Self-Compassion Statements

Emotional Awareness, Literacy, and Resilience

Self-compassion doesn't come easily for many Autistic people, as it may appear abstract, potentially manipulative, or simply bewildering as a concept. This struggle is particularly prominent if you mask, as you often harbor a relentless inner critic whose goal is to shield you from potential humiliation. Your inner critic is trying to protect you from other people's shame by beating them to the punch. Essentially, it attempts to safeguard you from the beratement of others by self-shaming before they get the chance!

Since this inner critic acts both as a guardian and a source of pain, it can feel intimidating to try to silence it—it may feel like trying to hush a barking dog that could be warning you of impending danger. Attempting to silence this protective force can evoke a sense of threat, making self-compassion a complex endeavor!

If you find this struggle relatable, consider integrating self-compassion statements that tie you to the broader human experience and emphasize self-attunement. Steer clear of excessively sentimental self-compassion statements that may incite an internal conflict with your inner critic or your Autistic mask, which seeks approval from allistic people. Until you tackle internalized neurodivergent shame and ableism, engaging in self-compassion exercises may set off a fierce internal battle!

For example, I find statements like "I am free to disregard others' judgments," "I am deserving of kindness and compassion," and "I am worthy of love and acceptance" particularly challenging to embrace (which I suspect is largely due to my experiences in an ableist society and my dislike of overly emotional language). Instead, I turn to self-compassion statements that concentrate more on acknowledging my immediate experience and discomfort. This is a form of radical self-attunement, whereby I am gently present with the distressing moment confronting me.

Here are some more balanced self-compassion statements that I find easier to adopt.

If self-compassion proves challenging for you, try repeating mild statements like these:

- This is a difficult moment. This is painful.
- I'm not alone in this. Others have felt this way before too.
- I'm human, and it's okay to feel the way I do.
- It's okay to feel what I feel right now.
- I trust my capacity to grow and learn from this experience.
- I'm going to get through this. I've faced tough times before and survived.
- I'm doing the best I can with what I have right now, and that's enough.

You will be practicing a powerful form of self-compassion when you tune into yourself during painful moments and simply acknowledge their difficulty.

Practice Affect Labeling

Emotional Regulation

Managing and regulating emotions can be challenging for Autistic people. Sensory overload, heightened nervous systems, and other factors can make emotion regulation more taxing. We often have difficulty keeping our emotions within a tolerable threshold where we can effectively work through them. However, a simple yet powerful practice can help: affect labeling.

Research has shown that labeling your emotions in real time can help calm you down. A recent study showed how this works. Participants in the study (all of whom feared spiders) were divided into groups, exposed to a live spider, and given different instructions. The group that was told to simply acknowledge their emotional experience by stating their emotions had the most significant improvements. By identifying their feelings, they were able to regulate their anxiety and make progress in facing their fear.

Labeling emotions has a direct impact on your brain. It activates the prefrontal cortex, which plays a crucial role in emotional regulation. This activation helps calm the amygdala and the limbic system, reducing the intensity of emotional responses.

Practicing affect labeling is invaluable for cultivating resilience, particularly for Autistic people, who often struggle with emotion identification due to alexithymia. Our difficulty in recognizing emotions contributes to increased anxiety and stress. We can improve this skill by intentionally engaging in affect-labeling practices.

Here are some practices that can help enhance affect labeling:

- **Develop emotional awareness:** Take time to observe physical sensations, thoughts, and behaviors linked to different emotions. Additionally, consider incorporating interoception-building techniques to help you recognize patterns that indicate specific emotional states (refer to Tune Into Your Body's Signals with a Body Scan and Integrate Body Awareness Into Daily Activities in Chapter 2).

- **Utilize visual aids:** Visual aids, such as the emotion matrix and feeling wheel, can help you label emotions. These color-coded lists of words can give you the vocabulary to identify your feelings.
- **Track your moods:** Using a mood tracker worksheet or app can help you become more aware of your emotions and notice trends.
- **Practice mindfulness:** Develop mindfulness to increase your present-moment awareness of emotions. Mindfulness can help you develop a clearer understanding of your emotional landscape. (See the Resist Emotional Avoidance and Move Toward Acceptance entry in this chapter for more.)
- **Journal:** Write in a journal to reflect on your experiences, noting moments when you experience various emotions and describing associated sensations. This practice enhances your emotional-attunement skills and improves your ability to accurately label and understand your feelings.
- **Seek social support:** Talk to trusted friends or family members who can provide an understanding space for discussing emotions. Sharing emotional experiences and seeking feedback can enhance your emotional understanding and affect-labeling skills.
- **Talk to a therapist:** A therapist can help you process emotions in such a way as to increase your emotional insight and awareness of your emotional landscape.

By incorporating affect-labeling practices into your daily life, you can build emotional resilience while gaining a deeper understanding of your emotions.

Distinguish Anxiety versus Sensory Overload

Emotional Regulation

One of the crucial skills that can help Autistic people improve emotional regulation is recognizing the distinction between emotions and sensory overload. It's like untangling a knot, figuring out what's causing your distress and discomfort. If you can understand whether your feelings are rooted in your internal thoughts and emotions or triggered by external sensory stimuli, you can gain insight into how to better regulate your nervous system.

For example, navigating through a school or a store can be a challenging experience, with bright lights, loud noises, and crowded spaces bombarding your senses. You might feel overwhelmed and agitated. However, it is helpful to distinguish this sensory overload from the anxiety, fear, sadness, or anger that you may experience in response to specific situations or thoughts.

Sensory overload occurs when your senses are inundated with external stimuli, leading to heightened agitation and discomfort. In some cases, it may resemble anxiety and can contribute to angry outbursts and emotional dysregulation, making it difficult to differentiate between the two experiences.

To differentiate between sensory overload and anxiety, pay attention to the triggers and physical sensations:

- If your distress is primarily driven by **external stimuli**, such as loud noises, bright lights, or crowded environments, it is likely a result of sensory overload.
- If your distress is primarily driven by **internal thoughts**, worries, or emotional triggers, it is indicative of anxiety or other emotion-based experiences.

By developing this awareness, you can find the right self-care practices to navigate both your emotional experiences and sensory overload. For sensory overload, you can use sensory blockers—tools or techniques that help reduce sensory input, such as noise-canceling headphones or sunglasses—and take sensory breaks to give your nervous system a chance to calm down. When it comes to your emotions, you can employ emotional-regulation techniques.

Another critical distinction is learning the difference between anxiety (which is emotional) and sensory dread. As explained by Dr. Jonathan Dalton, licensed psychologist and founder and director of the Center for Anxiety and Behavioral Change, anxiety is the fear of potential future events driven by internal thoughts—differing from dread, which is the anticipation of known discomfort. Sensory dread, often experienced by Autistic individuals, is the fear of known situations that can cause sensory overload. For example, you may feel sensory dread when anticipating visits to the mall, dentist, or grocery store, as you know these environments likely cause sensory overload.

Both anxiety and sensory dread can cause you to avoid certain situations. Sensory dread may lead you to avoid known sensory-rich situations. In contrast, anxiety may lead you to avoid getting together with a friend or going to a job interview due to fear of potential embarrassment or negative judgment.

When confronted with sensory dread, it can be helpful to prepare yourself in advance by using sensory blockers, having an exit plan to take sensory breaks, and limiting the amount of high-sensory tasks in your day. For anxiety, you can try unhooking from unhelpful thoughts, practicing relaxation techniques, and challenging avoidance patterns.

Understanding the differences between your emotions and sensory overload allows you to respond with greater self-awareness and take targeted actions to regulate yourself. It's like having a road map to guide you through the twists and turns of your inner world.

Harness the Power of Effective Worrying

Emotional Regulation

Worry often gets a bad reputation, but it can serve a purpose. Worrying allows you to anticipate potential challenges, analyze risks, and problem-solve. However, when worry becomes overwhelming and consumes your thoughts, it can negatively impact your emotional well-being. The key is to worry effectively and productively. (Yes, that *is* possible.)

One strategy for managing worry is to create a designated "Worry Period." This dedicated time allows you to contain your worries and address them in a structured and intentional way.

Implementing a Worry Period involves these steps:

1. **Choose a designated time:** Select a consistent time slot each day for your Worry Period (around 10–20 minutes). This will be the time when you dedicate your full attention to addressing worries.
2. **Write down your worries:** Use a notebook or digital tool to jot down worries. Externalizing thoughts creates a sense of containment.
3. **Break worries into tasks:** As you list your worries, distinguish between those you can control (within your circle of influence, meaning you can take actions that influence the outcome) and those you cannot. For the worries within your control, create actionable steps to address each concern. Transforming your worries into concrete actions makes them more manageable.
4. **Practice mindfulness:** When worries arise during the day, remind your mind that you will address them during the designated Worry Period.

Remember, worry can actually be productive if you manage it intentionally. This Worry Period can help you regain control over your concerns as you identify them and break them down into tasks that can address their sources.

Uncover Your Raw Spots and Triggers

Emotional Regulation

Raw spots are sensitive areas that can evoke strong emotional reactions within you. They represent vulnerabilities and past wounds that, when brought to the surface unexpectedly, intensify your emotions. When your raw spots are triggered, your past experiences intrude into the present, causing you to respond not only to the immediate stressor but also to your historical pain.

Identifying raw spots enhances your understanding of your emotional reactions and enables you to take better control of these moments.

To increase awareness of your raw spots:

- **Reflect on past experiences:** Consider situations that have triggered strong emotional responses. Document triggering events, including the context, your reactions, and associated thoughts. Look for patterns and themes over time.
- **Notice reactions:** Pay attention to how your body and mind react when encountering potential triggers. Be mindful of physical sensations and emotions.
- **Identify the story:** Raw spots are often connected to stories we tell ourselves. These stories can be deeply ingrained, influencing how you view yourself, others, and the world.

Once you've identified your raw spots, develop strategies to manage them. For example, you might mindfully acknowledge and name your raw spots when they are activated (such as, "My abandonment fear is activated right now"), seek support from trusted people, and employ relaxation techniques like deep-breathing exercises or progressive muscle relaxation to reduce emotional distress.

Find Alternatives to Self-Harm

Emotional Regulation

Self-harm can manifest as a coping response for many Autistic people, often arising from various factors such as overwhelming sensory experiences, an attempt to cope with intense emotions, the need for sensory input, or an urge to punish ourselves. Self-harm can also become addictive due to a complex interplay of factors, including the temporary relief or distraction it provides, the release of endorphins that can induce a sense of euphoria, and the underlying emotional distress that drives it.

By taking a harm-reduction approach, we can cultivate alternative strategies that provide healthier ways to cope with difficult emotions.

Here are some alternative activities to try:

- **Grab ice:** Holding ice or doing an ice dive (putting your face in ice water) for up to twenty seconds or safely placing an ice pack on your body can provide a jolt of cold sensation. This can release endorphins and create a similar physiological response to self-harm but with less risk involved.
- **Practice grounding techniques:** Grounding techniques help redirect your attention away from distressing thoughts (see the Anchor in the Present Moment entry in this chapter for more).
- **Try changing temperatures:** Alternating between warm and cold temperatures, such as taking a warm shower followed by a splash of cold water, can stimulate the body and shift your focus away from distress. Temperature changes also impact the body's physiological responses, including increasing blood flow and releasing endorphins (not recommended if you have dysautonomia, such as POTS).

- **Move—and quickly:** Engaging in rapid movement, such as running, dancing, or jumping, can increase your heart rate and stimulate the release of endorphins. These activities help channel emotional energy into a more constructive outlet.
- **Soothe your senses:** Engage in self-care practices that comfort and relax you. This could include taking a warm bath, listening to calming music, or doing activities that bring you joy and relaxation. These activities can help regulate emotions and promote a sense of well-being.
- **Use a TENS unit:** A TENS (Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation) unit, is a device that delivers low-voltage electrical currents through electrodes placed on the skin. It can be a helpful tool if sensory dysregulation is contributing to self-harming behaviors, as it provides a strong sensory input that can assist in sensory regulation and provide relief. (While TENS units can be used on your own at home, consult with a health care provider before using one, especially if you have any underlying medical conditions such as epilepsy, and be sure to attend to safety precautions when using it.)
- **Seek support:** Reach out to trusted friends, family members, or mental health professionals who can provide understanding, validation, and support during difficult times.
- **Assemble a distress-tolerance kit:** Assemble a collection of items that provide comfort and distraction during distressing moments. This could include stress balls, fidget toys, soothing lotions, a picture of a loved one, a meaningful note, or a favorite book. Having a distress-tolerance kit allows you to quickly access healthy coping tools so you don't turn to self-harm.

You can strengthen your response to overwhelming emotions and situations with these tips—but don't be afraid to ask for help too. Self-harm is a serious matter, and you may need professional support for managing it.

Anchor in the Present Moment

Emotional Regulation

Grounding techniques are akin to a sturdy anchor that can hold you steadfastly through the turbulent waves of intense emotions. Just as an anchor keeps a boat in one place amid a stormy sea, grounding techniques provide you with a reliable touchstone when you are faced with overwhelming emotions, anxiety, panic, dissociation, or a sense of disconnection from the present moment.

In those challenging times, grounding techniques help you find stability, regain a sense of presence, and navigate your inner experiences with greater clarity and resilience. Grounding techniques also moor you in the present moment, establishing a firm connection to reality and enhancing your overall well-being.

Here are some ideas to try anchoring yourself in the present moment:

- **Physical grounding techniques:** These methods involve bringing your attention to your body and the sensations you experience. Physical grounding can include practices such as running cool water over your hands and focusing on the sensation, or engaging in gentle physical movements. By focusing on the physical sensations, you anchor yourself in the present moment and create a sense of stability and grounding.
- **Mental grounding techniques:** Mental grounding involves redirecting your thoughts. This can be done through activities like counting, reciting mantras, and engaging in cognitive distractions, such as solving puzzles. You can also try giving your mind specific tasks, like identifying cities that start with the letter "P" or recalling songs by a certain artist. These activities serve to distract you from the distressing thoughts. By shifting your attention, you cultivate a sense of mental stability, allowing you to regain control.

- **Sensory grounding techniques:** These techniques engage your senses to connect with the immediate environment. This can be achieved by focusing on sensory experiences, such as listening to calming music, feeling the texture of an object, or smelling a soothing scent. Another effective technique is the 5-4-3-2-1 sensory grounding exercise: Identify five things you can see, four things you can touch or feel, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. By immersing yourself in the present sensory experience, you will also ground yourself in the present moment.

Grounding techniques support you as you manage overwhelming emotions and restore a sense of balance from which you can then process those emotions. One important note: Grounding techniques should not be used as a long-term strategy to avoid your painful emotions. Emotional avoidance is not helpful in the long run. These techniques are most effective as temporary tools for navigating intense emotions and bringing you back to a space from which you can effectively process your emotions.

Resist Emotional Avoidance and Move Toward Acceptance

Emotional Regulation

I used to refer to my emotions as those "pesky little things." I consider myself an emotion minimizer, which I used to chalk up to being a highly analytical and logically oriented person. And while this is certainly a part of it, I have realized a negative (or shadow) side to my relationship with emotions. In addition to being an emotion minimizer, I am also prone to emotional avoidance. And it has taken an active effort to unlearn my ways!

Emotional avoidance is a common coping mechanism among many Autistic people. When you suppress or avoid feelings due to fear or discomfort, you're unfortunately vulnerable to substance abuse, addiction, self-harm, and emotional numbing. Additionally, emotional avoidance heightens stress, anxiety, and disconnection from yourself and others, potentially contributing to chronic pain or other physical complaints. Moreover, it impairs your problem-solving abilities and hampers effective resolution of underlying issues.

For Autistic people, the inclination toward emotional avoidance is understandable. Many of us develop this in response to the too-muchness of the world—the overwhelming sensory experiences and challenges we face in processing and expressing emotions. While emotional avoidance may provide temporary relief, it can have long-term detrimental effects on your mental health.

When you embrace emotional acceptance, you cultivate positive coping mechanisms to acknowledge and engage with your emotions. It means granting permission for emotions to run their natural course. Positive coping skills include any methods where you are actively processing and working through your emotions.

Here are some examples of positive coping:

- **Journaling:** Writing down your thoughts and feelings can be a powerful tool for emotional exploration and processing. Through journaling, you can gain insights into your emotions, identify patterns or triggers, and find clarity in your experiences.
- **Mindfulness:** Mindfulness practices involve bringing your attention to the present moment with curiosity and nonjudgment. Observing your thoughts and feelings without attaching to them or getting carried away can help you develop a more balanced and gentle relationship with your emotional experiences.
- **Therapy:** Therapy allows you to work with a trained professional who can support you in exploring and processing your emotions. Therapists can help you develop coping strategies and gain insight into your emotions.
- **Emotional expression:** Engaging in creative outlets, such as art or music, allows you to express and explore your emotions cathartically. Creating art or playing music can provide a sense of release and offer communication when words are difficult to find.

Emotional acceptance requires self-awareness and compassion. It involves recognizing that all emotions, including discomfort, provide valuable insights. By accepting and approaching your emotions with curiosity and kindness, you cultivate resilience and self-awareness to navigate life's challenges.